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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 002184

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: RECENT ATTACKS ON CIVILIAN TARGETS PROMPT CONCERN,
BUT NOT RETRIBUTION

REF: BAGHDAD 2121

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Gary A. Grappo
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Since late July, a series of explosions targeting political party offices, mosques and civilian gathering places across the country have unsettled Iraqis about the possibility of renewed sectarianism. While the number of overall casualties is relatively low compared to levels seen in 2006-2007, these incidents have prompted public anxiety about the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and sparked fears of increasing violence as Iraq prepares for the January 2010 elections. The initial reaction to the attacks has been calm and measured, reflecting the strong vested interests of differing political factions in preventing a return to sectarian bloodshed. Please see action request in paragraph ¶12. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

THREE POLITICAL PARTY OFFICES ATTACKED

¶2. (SBU) A vehicle-borne explosion ripped through the Fallujah office of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP-predominantly Sunni Arab) on July 25, wounding 20 IIP staff and other civilians. On July 30, seven persons were killed when a bomb exploded in the office of the National Movement for Reform and Development (mostly Sunni Arab) in Baquba (reftel). PRT Diyala noted that the party had no representation in the Diyala Provincial Council (PC) but was actively campaigning to diversify its membership among Kurds and Shi'a.

¶3. (C) On August 2, an explosion damaged the headquarters of the National Dialogue Council (NDC) party in Babil, but caused no casualties. Babil PC member Suhaila Abdulrida told PRT staff that she thought the NDC bombing and an August 1 explosion at the produce market in nearby Iskandariya City were related. She said she was not sure whether Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) could completely contain the situation, but that they seemed to be "adequate." Many Babil residents believe that the two bombings might reflect competition between political parties in the run-up to parliamentary elections in January 2010, rather than sectarian hatred, according to Abdulrida. (NOTE: Former Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashadani is a member of NDC. The Iraqi media report that he has been actively courting Kurdish and Shi'a partners to form a cross-sectarian coalition. END NOTE.)

SHI'A MOSQUES TARGETED

¶4. (SBU) Six coordinated explosions hit five Shi'a mosques and outdoor prayer centers in Iraq on July 31, killing 29 and wounding more than 50 civilians as they left Friday prayer services. Two of the mosques were affiliated with the Sadr Trend. Rather than seeking to incite anti-Sunni sentiment,

Sadrists clerics -- and some websites linked to the Sadr Trend -- urged restraint following the attacks. They admonished the faithful to respect the rule of law and called on Iraqis not to disparage their security forces. A few other websites, however, accused "extremist Sunnis" (distinguishing them from other Sunnis), the Awakening Councils, and Coalition Forces for attempting to foment trouble to remain in Iraq's cities.

15. (C) At least 51 people were killed on August 7, after a truck bomb killed worshippers leaving a Shi'a mosque in eastern Ninewa while road side bombs killed Shi'a worshippers walking back into Baghdad after the end of the Shabaniyah pilgrimage. Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNF-I) confirmed that at least 42 Iraqis were killed on August 10 in a series of attacks across Mosul and Baghdad that apparently targeted Shi'a neighborhoods.

FEARS OF FUTURE VIOLENCE

16. (C) Prominent Sunni political figures were quick to publicly and strongly condemn these attacks against Shi'a civilians. Ambassador and MNFI Commanding General also issued strong statements of condemnation. On August 1, Parliament Speaker Ayad al-Sammarraie told local media that, "We condemn these bloody crimes, and are confident that the Iraqi people will not respond to desperate terrorist attacks." In regard to the August 7 attacks, the IIP announced: "The party believes that this new wave of bombings has political goals and is increasing day by day with the approach of parliamentary elections." (COMMENT: This is a

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significant step for major Sunni politicians, who have mostly refrained from issuing similar statements in the past after attacks on the Shi'a community. END COMMENT.)

17. (C) In private, many Iraqi political leaders are concerned about the ramifications of the terrorist attacks. VP Tariq al-Hashimi (IIP/Tawafuq) speculated to DCM on August 8 that the recent violence was committed by rival Shi'a political groups seeking to incite a sectarian response against the Sunni community. Al-Hashimi's senior advisor, Krikor Derhagopian, reinforced this point, telling poloffs on August 11 that some of the recent attacks were perpetrated by Shi'a groups, and were not designed to foment cross-sectarian retaliation. He predicted a further escalation of intra-sectarian violence as the elections draw nearer, noting that such attacks are a means to divide up interests, cash, and resources. "Political leaders fear their co-religionist competitors more than challengers from other faiths, because the co-religionists represent a greater existential threat to their political power base," he asserted.

18. (C) MP Sami al-Askary (Da'wa) told poloff August 5 that the popular response to the bombings has been muted. He commented that "someone is trying to stir things up and provoke the Sadrists into striking back." Al-Askary assessed that it was unlikely the attacks would trigger a violent sectarian reprisal since both the Sunni and Shi'a communities feared a spiraling backlash. He conceded, however, that attacks focused on Shi'a communities might harden political debate and hamper accommodation between Shi'a parties and other ethno-sectarian groups.

19. (C) A representative of Mercy Corps, a U.S-funded NGO that implements conflict management and other social programs throughout Sadr City and eastern Baghdad, told poloffs August 5 that her organization's clients were extremely concerned by the recent violent attacks. She reported that ordinary citizens and civil society leaders believed that the July 31 mosque bombings were committed by a terrorist organization with the intent to cripple public

life, dampen political participation, and undermine the idea of national unity in Shi'a neighborhoods before the January elections. Mahdi al-Shoki, imam of the Al-Rasoul Mosque in Sadr City told PRT Team leader and poloffs on August 12 that the series of bombings from Ninewah to Baghdad was the work of Al-Qaeda and "certain" political factions that were trying to provoke ordinary Iraqis. He emphasized that "sectarianism is over" but added Sadr City residents expected "politically-inspired violence" to continue through the election.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Embassy and PRT staff are limited in their ability to gauge street-level reaction in most corners of Iraq. To date, however, it is clear that most Iraqis, including a large majority of the Shi'a community, have remained calm and restrained in the face of the uptick in violence. This likely reflects the fact that it is in the strong self-interest of leading Shi'a and Sunni groups to maintain stability and avoid retaliatory attacks. PM Maliki, for example, cannot afford a large outbreak of sectarian violence, no matter what the reasons, as he stakes his political future on his tough "law and order" reputation. The PM's Da'wa party and ISCI do not wish to alienate the moderate Sunni groups they hope to recruit to add a veneer of national unity and non-sectarianism to their campaigns. The Sunni leadership, on the other hand, has been unusually proactive in condemning this violence and stressing the unity of Iraqis in order to avoid retaliation against Sunni communities and to prevent derailing progress on issues of concern to them (e.g., detainee releases, Sons of Iraq integration, etc.).

¶11. (C) COMMENT (CONTINUED): If these explosions and attacks continue or escalate, Iraqis may retreat back into their traditional ethno-sectarian camps as the country enters into what could be a bitterly divisive electoral campaign season. Most Iraqis, however, seem resigned to a certain level of election-related violence and do not seem ready, at this time at least, to let it reignite a vicious cycle of sectarian attacks.

¶12. (C) ACTION REQUEST: Post strongly recommends that Washington, following on the Ambassador and CG's joint statement of August 10, makes a similar statement condemning religiously motivated attacks on mosques and worshippers.
END ACTION REQUEST.

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